

UK firefighters begin first nationwide strike in 25 years

Our correspondent
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Britain's firefighters began a national 48-hour strike on November 13 following the breakdown of talks with local authority employers and the government. The strike is the first national action in the industry in 25 years.

In a ballot earlier this year, firefighters voted by nine to one to take strike action in pursuit of a pay increase of 40 percent. The average firefighters wage is currently £21,000, lagging significantly behind similar professions. A pay deal following the last national strike in 1978 had pegged firefighters wages in line with the average manual wage, which has declined over the last two decades. Three further strikes, each lasting eight days, are planned before the end of the year holiday period.

The Fire Brigades Union (FBU) sanctioned the action after it condemned the "insulting and derisory" pay deal being offered by the government's supposedly independent review of the fire service headed by Sir George Bain.

Provocatively, the Bain review proposed a four percent increase this year, with significant strings attached. A seven percent rise the following year could take place if the firefighters agreed to sweeping "modernisation" changes that the review recommended. The proposed pay offer—11 percent over two years—was considerably less than the 16 percent mooted by the local authorities last month, leading to allegations that Prime Minister Tony Blair had intervened to stop the offer and provoke a strike.

Once it became clear the firefighters would proceed with their action, Blair and other government ministers have adopted an ever more belligerent tone, in an attempt to turn public opinion against the action. The Labour government has insisted it will not cede to the firefighters "selfish" and "unreasonable" demands, as

it would result in other workers calling for similar increases and collapse the UK economy. Only hours before the strike began, Blair told Parliament that "no government on earth" could concede to a wage claim of 40 percent.

Sir George Bain also fuelled the dispute by stating that firefighters "are generally well paid". "Taking into account the very generous pension entitlement, the holiday arrangements, the good job security, firemen are actually not badly rewarded. The recruitment and retention figures back this up. There's about 40 applications for every vacancy in the fire service," he stated arrogantly.

In reality, the fully qualified firefighters' salary of £21,500 is below the national average wage, despite the hazardous nature of the job and the compulsory shift patterns. Such dangers were highlighted on November 12 at the funeral of firefighter Rob Miller in Leicester with thousands of members of the public and fellow workers in attendance. Miller had been a firefighter for 25 years and died two weeks ago after falling through a floor at a factory fire in the city.

FBU leader Andy Gilchrist said of the Bain review, "I don't consider 11 percent over two years to be either substantial or significant," adding that firefighters had already voted to strike to reject a previous pay offer of 4 percent.

The Retained Firefighters Union (RFU) which has a no-strike policy—and is working alongside the army as an emergency force said the review could "form the basis" for negotiation and settlement.

Fire service minister Nick Raynsford described Bain's proposals as an "exciting, far-reaching" package. Raynsford added that any pay deal would be linked to changes such as increased flexibility and improved partnerships with other agencies and that

“We made it clear that if they [the employers] went beyond 4 percent they would have to fund that.”

In the days leading up to the industrial action, the media has churned out government propaganda denouncing firefighters as unpatriotic for striking just as British army troops are being mobilised for a impending war with Iraq. Some 18,500 British army troops, navy, and air force servicemen have been drafted to replace the striking firefighters. Of these 12,000 are drawn from the army and 3,000 to 4,000 each from the Royal Navy and the RAF. They are attending fire emergencies in 50-year-old Green Goddess vehicles.

The tabloid daily newspaper, the *Sun* ran an article on the day the strike began with the headline, “Union boss is a flaming idiot.” The right-wing tabloid made a hysterical comparison between the firefighters and the Al Qaeda terrorist group, accusing the workers of playing into “the terrorists hands” and leaving “Britain at the mercy of Al Qaeda”.



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